

Protective Siblings by HashtagLEH

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Summary:

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Steve rolled his eyes, closing the sliding glass door before locking it. “I’m a big boy, I can handle some of yours and El’s friends for

however long they need to crash here,” he said.

“They are *not* my friends,” Billy insisted, offended. Steve gave him a dry look like he didn’t believe him, which was ridiculous because Billy was telling the truth. He’d agreed to help Kali and her crew because it would upset El if he didn’t, and nothing more.

Protective Siblings

Author's Note:

Y'all I'm an aunt now - my sister (and best friend) had her baby and not to be biased or anything but he's literally the cutest baby I've ever seen. I won't tell you how much cumulative time I've spent the past couple of days staring at pictures of him because uhhh I just love him so much.

Anyway. That's my life update hbu ;)

But that's not relevant to the fic. So, onward!

OH I ALMOST FORGOT. When I posted the last installment I forgot to add it to the series until after it had been posted. I don't know how quickly ao3 catches that as far as making it into the email alerts for those following the series, so if you're NOT following the series you should be fine but if you are, you might have missed the last fic and you should definitely go read that one first. Just so you're up to date on what's going on.

Anyway. Now that that's over with, I think that's all I have to say. NOW you can continue. :)

“Come on in – through the kitchen, down the hallway, the living room is to your left. The beds aren’t made up yet, so you can just wait around on the couches.”

“Thank you,” Dottie was the one to say for all of them, clutching her bag at her side and taking in the interior of the house as they walked through the sliding glass door in the back. Kali gave Steve a nod as she passed, eyes sweeping over him assessingly before looking at Billy standing off to the side more. She raised an eyebrow at him, clearly expecting an explanation as to who Steve was.

“Just go to the living room – we can talk more there,” Billy said,

rolling his eyes a little and withholding a sigh. It definitely looked strange for Kali and her crew to be walking through Steve's expensive house, looking as dirty and run-down as they ever did. Billy wondered if he looked as displaced in Steve's house as they did now.

It was just past sunset on New Year's Day, and Billy knew that that wasn't an accident on their part, because the dark provided cover for them to arrive unnoticed into Hawkins. They had their van parked around the back of Steve's house, out of the way and out of view from the street.

Billy didn't know exactly why Kali had called him for help, but Steve had found out that they were in some sort of trouble and they needed to stay in Hawkins, and had immediately offered that they stay at his house. Apparently his parents wouldn't be back until the end of the month at the earliest, so no one would know that they were there. And, Billy reflected, it's not like they could go anywhere *else* in Hawkins that would allow them to lay low.

And so it had been decided, and twelve hours later they had shown up at Steve's sliding glass door, looking leery at Steve, but hopefully trusting that Billy wasn't setting them up.

"You sure you're alright with them staying here?" Billy asked Steve after the five had disappeared.

Steve rolled his eyes, closing the sliding glass door before locking it. "I'm a big boy, I can handle some of yours and El's friends for however long they need to crash here," he said.

"They are *not* my friends," Billy insisted, offended. Steve gave him a dry look like he didn't believe him, which was ridiculous because Billy was telling the truth. He'd agreed to help Kali and her crew because it would upset El if he didn't, and nothing more.

"Just wait till you actually meet them before you go making any decisions," Billy muttered, turning and stalking into the living room, Steve trailing behind him.

"Alright, you feel like sharing what the hell is going on, then?" Billy asked as he entered the living room. He dropped into his usual corner

of the couch, thankfully empty with the others scattered around the room. Funshine and Mick were seated on the other couch, Axel was sitting on the floor with his legs crossed casually in front of him, Dottie was standing at the fireplace and inspecting the pictures on the mantle, and Kali was standing next to the couch, arms folded as she watched everyone.

“Billy, don’t be rude,” Steve said, sitting in the other corner of the couch. Billy frowned at him, put out, but Steve ignored him and said to everyone else, “I’m Steve Harrington. What’s your names? I only know Kali from El’s picture.” Kali gave a wave at that, not saying anything, just looking at Steve with a hard stare.

The others briefly introduced themselves to Steve, and when Dottie looked up from the pictures at Steve, she tilted her head and said, “Harrington, right?” Steve nodded, a little confused, and she hummed thoughtfully before giving a brief, “Dottie,” and going to sit next to Funshine on the couch.

Billy didn’t know what was up with that, but at the moment he didn’t really care because he just wanted to know why the gang had interrupted New Year’s Day out of the blue before showing up in Hawkins, looking over their shoulders like they had been chased there.

Luckily, Billy didn’t have to ask again because Kali didn’t keep them waiting.

“You remember Ray Carroll,” she said flatly, not really a question. Billy raised his eyebrow in wordless direction for her to continue. “He had disappeared by the time we made it back a week later. His apartment was completely empty; neighbors had no idea where he might have gone.”

“Probably running from the people who broke in to kill him,” Billy pointed out dryly.

“That was our thought too, which is why we didn’t reach out before now,” Kali told him, frustration bleeding into her voice. “We looked for him again. Got him, too. Didn’t think more of it.”

“Wait, you guys *actually* killed him?” Steve interrupted, looking a little uneasy.

Axel made a rude sound. “The hell are you doing with this preppy kid, Bill? If you can’t handle a little bit of justified murder, yuppie boy...”

“Stop,” Kali cut him off sharply, and then turned her piercing gaze on Steve. “If you would prefer that we leave, tell us now. If not, shut up and listen.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m not kicking you out,” he said plainly. “But you also have to understand that I have no idea who you guys are or what you’re capable of; getting the facts straight for the people who will be living in my house for the foreseeable future makes sense.”

Kali tilted her head in acknowledgement. Billy realized his fingers were digging into his knees, and forced himself to relax and let go of his anger because Steve was *fine*. He already knew that Axel was an asshole; he needed to stop taking his insults so personally – especially when the insults weren’t even aimed at *him*.

“As I was saying,” Kali pressed on, “We didn’t think anything more of Ray’s death. But two days ago we were surrounded in our most recent hideout. It wasn’t the police, either – I am certain now that Ray was planted in our path this time so we would be discovered by Brenner.”

“El said Brenner is dead,” Billy said immediately. “She saw him die.”

“She saw him *attacked*,” she corrected. “She didn’t actually confirm that he was dead. Based on my own resources, I am certain that he is still alive, and he wants his runaway experiments back – Jane, and me, I’m sure among others.”

“Why the hell would you run to *Hawkins*, then?” Steve asked, lip curling slightly as he no doubt reflected on his hate for the man El had nightmares about – the one she used to call “Papa”.

“This is where Brenner worked for years,” Kali responded. “He’s familiar with it here, and he knows that Jane went missing from

here. After no doubt learning from Ray that we are both alive, his mission has resumed, and the first step I'm sure is getting us back."

"You think he's here to find El," Billy summed up, and Kali nodded once in response.

"She can do as she did with Ray in Chicago, and find Brenner," she said, eyes alight. "Then we can finally get rid of him for good."

"No fucking way," Billy snapped, rising to his feet. "That little girl has been through *enough* without having to go searching for him *again*. Especially if you're wrong and he *is* actually dead."

"And what if we're right, huh?" Mick piped up, glaring at him like he was stupid. "What if Brenner *is* looking for her, and because everyone insists it's all fake then she ends up taken or *worse*."

"I am not about to go back to that bastard, and I'm not going to let my sister fall victim to him, either," Kali said fiercely.

"Then find him *yourself*," Billy stressed, hands clenching and unclenching in fists at his side. "You did it fine enough before you even knew she existed. She is fucking *twelve years old* – she's already seen enough death, and she doesn't need you shoving her into *more*."

"I think El should decide," Steve cut in calmly before anyone could come to blows – whether physical or mental. Billy turned betrayed eyes to Steve, a gaze which Steve met squarely before looking at Kali again. "It's *her* powers that would be used, and that wouldn't be easy for her."

"Fine," Kali huffed, folding her arms.

"Fine," Billy agreed only after Kali, mouth pulled down into a scowl. "But *you* are not allowed to push your mental shit on her to get her to agree."

Kali looked offended at the mere suggestion that she would do such a thing, which was ridiculous because she already had before, back in November, so it's not like it would have been out of character for her.

"Well, if that's all settled then I'll be on my way," Billy said, clapping

his hands together once and turning to leave. "I'll pick up El tomorrow and bring her here."

As he walked out the front door, he heard Steve directing the gang about sleeping arrangements, and he shook his head to himself as he pulled the door closed behind him and stalked down to the Camaro. He could see what Kali was doing – she wanted an excuse to get close to El and didn't know how to do that except by bringing up their shared past. But Kali seemed to forget that El was twelve fucking years old, and already thought the one she'd called father for most of her life had died right in front of her. He didn't want to put El through more trauma, because he *knew* that she would feel a responsibility to help Kali in her quest and would look for Brenner even if she didn't want to. Billy didn't think that Kali realized how much El cared about her, and was trying to force them together so that she could take that role she wanted in El's life.

Pausing as he put his key in the ignition, he suddenly understood. He flicked his eyes up at Harrington's house for a moment, before turning the key in the ignition and backing out of the driveway. He thought he might have a way to get his thoughts through to Kali.

The next morning, after Billy had had a very long talk with Hopper about what was going on and arguing their points back and forth, Billy was successful in getting El in the car with him. She knew what was going on by now – even without the discussion between he and Hopper that she had no doubt heard from the next room, the weirdness with which he had been acting since the day before would've had her poking around in his mind for explanation. She was a little nervous to see Kali again, because she was worried that Kali might be angry with her for leaving her in Chicago back in November, but Billy assured her that Kali was as eager as she ever was to be friends – *sisters* – with the younger girl.

Walking up to Steve's front door, he let himself in as was usual, though this time he knocked just before he opened the door to let the others inside know that he was coming in.

Axel was the first person he saw, appearing in the doorway of the living room and eyes immediately going to them.

“Shirley,” Axel greeted almost pleasantly, and Billy had the sudden realization that Kali wasn’t the only one who had decided to adopt the small brunette beside him. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that, really, but he didn’t have time to say anything else before Axel’s eyes flicked to the girl at Billy’s other side.

“Who’s the kid, Bill?” he drawled.

“I’m Max,” Max volunteered, not protesting the “kid” comment like she normally would – like she normally *did*, when Billy or Steve referred to the monster squad as kids or children or something similar. But Billy had shared with her what was going on after he’d gotten back to the house the night before, and she knew her role.

“I’m Billy’s sister,” Max finished with an innocent smile. Billy knew exactly how much deviousness was hiding under the innocent façade though, and he was glad she was on his side these days. He hid a shudder at the imagined possibilities of what she would get up to without him there – things he was sure would happen as she got older and he *wasn’t* there all the time. But he shoved those thoughts aside, because it wasn’t the time.

Then, acting like nothing was wrong, Max walked past Axel and toward where she remembered the kitchen was, despite only having been at Steve’s house once before.

“Steve!” she called, voice just a hair short of whiny. “Do you have Eggos?”

Axel turned a look back on Billy, raising an incredulous eyebrow. Billy shrugged in response. “Babysitting duty,” he drawled. “Ellie, you want Eggos too, I’m guessing?”

El hummed in affirmation, following after Billy into the kitchen, where Max was digging in Steve’s freezer for the box of Eggos that Steve always kept in stock these days. Steve was sitting on the island counter, watching her with a look of amusement. His gaze turned to Billy, and the look was *knowing*, but he thankfully didn’t call Billy out on bringing his sister over.

“How was your night?” Billy checked with him, because he didn’t

think the gang would actually *hurt* Steve, but that still left a wide range of options on the things they *could* do to make life difficult for him.

But Steve laughed a little and said, “It was *fine*, Billy,” he insisted. “They’re really not that bad.” He looked over at Max at a ripping sound coming from her direction, and sighed when he saw that Max had opened the bag holding the Eggos in absolutely the worst way possible, so that repackaging them and shoving them back in the freezer for later would be impossible.

“I guess we’re going through the whole box today,” Steve said, hopping off the counter as the gang appeared in the doorway, trickling in one after another. Steve directed his next comment to them, asking, “You guys want Eggos, too?”

“Yes,” Dottie was the one to say, cheerful like nothing was wrong.

“Max, El, keep cycling them through – you’re on toaster duty,” Steve directed to the two girls. “I’ve got another box in the garage freezer.”

“What is the little girl doing here?” Kali demanded, cutting through the intentionally light atmosphere in the room. El looked up at Kali, expression at once pleased to see her sister again and wary at the girl’s tone. Max pretended ignorance, pulling the cooked Eggos out of the toaster and setting them on a plate, not glancing over at anyone in the gang.

Billy raised an eyebrow at her, affecting innocence as well as derision. “You *wanted* her here, so I brought her.”

“You know I’m not talking about Jane – what is *she* doing here?” Kali sneered at him, gesturing at Max as she spoke.

“Parents aren’t back till tonight, so I’ve got babysitting duty,” Billy said carelessly; as much as it was the truth, he knew as well as Max did that she didn’t need babysitting. And it wasn’t like being around him would keep her out of trouble – case in point, the fact that he’d brought her along to talk about finding and killing Brenner. Neil would be pissed if he knew.

"I already know about the whole thing with the lab," Max added, looking over at the half-Indian girl. "So don't worry about filtering anything for my sake; we're cool." She pressed down the levers on the toaster just as Steve reappeared, holding a huge box of Eggos.

"We don't need to be getting a *child* involved in this..." Kali started, but Billy interrupted her before she could go on.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Max is seven months older than El – so she's obviously not a child."

Kali went silent, and her nostrils flared as she glared at Billy, silently seething. She seemed to have gathered Billy's point in bringing his sister along, but she was at a loss now for what to say or do to get her way. Her gang was silently watching them, apparently waiting to see what stance their leader would take, and El was looking at Billy with an expression he didn't have time to try to decipher beyond the fact that she didn't seem to be *upset*, exactly.

"Come on," Billy said after a long moment of tense silence, turning to the fridge to grab the toppings he knew El liked on her Eggos. "We'll talk after breakfast."

Kali watched El during breakfast, as she drenched her waffles in syrup and whipped cream, face getting sticky with sugar as she ate. She sat right beside Kali at the table, seemingly content to just be there with them, and told the older girl that Eggos were her favorite breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. Billy was glad when none of them tried talking about the reason they were all there, because he wanted to talk to Kali alone before any of that happened.

The others were surprisingly good guests, as they all went to wash their dishes at the sink after they were done eating. Steve stayed behind at the table with Billy, tugging at his arm to keep him back for a moment while the others filed out.

"I can keep the others away, if you want to talk to Kali alone," he said, and Billy was surprised by Steve's immediate understanding of Billy's intentions. He kicked himself for the surprise a moment later

though, because Steve had proven himself to be astute before at picking up what others were thinking and feeling, so it wasn't as though this came out of the blue. "You can go upstairs, or to the backyard."

Billy nodded, squeezing Steve's arm briefly as he walked past, going to the kitchen to pull Kali aside. "Thanks, pretty boy."

He found Kali standing off to the side, watching as El and Max talked with Axel about what he gathered was Madonna's most recent album. It was strange to see Axel looking so patient and even amused, Billy reflected. He found himself briefly wondering whether the man had sisters of his own.

Kali noticed him as soon as he walked in, and the somewhat longing expression on her face as she watched El turned hard as she looked at him, resentment clear in every line of her face. Billy didn't say anything, just jerked his head a little, a wordless request for her to follow him. She did immediately, but he was certain that it was more because she wanted to tear into him more than she wanted to have an actual discussion with him.

This was confirmed as soon as the sliding door was closed behind them, and they stood in the backyard, breath fogging in front of them at the chill. Kali immediately turned to him, shoving him in the chest, apparently just not noticing that he had ten inches and easily sixty pounds on her. He supposed it didn't really matter, considering her powers, but he let himself be pushed back a little, because he figured she could do whatever she wanted to *him*, just so long as he got some things through to her about El in the meantime.

"What the *hell* are you playing at?" she demanded of him, eyes burning as she stared up at him. "You think you can just *control* my sister, just as Brenner did, and refuse to let her use her gifts how she wants to use them? What the *hell* is wrong with you?"

"I'm not controlling anyone," Billy said strongly, glaring back at her. "El can do whatever the hell she wants. But *you're* the one who has the history of manipulating her just so that she will feel like she needs to do something for your fucking approval."

“How *dare* you,” Kali spat furiously, hands clenching in fists at her sides. “Jane is my *sister*...”

“Of course she is!” Billy interrupted, rolling his eyes even as his lip curled in disdain. “And she turns *thirteen* next month. Do you remember being thirteen? Do you remember what it was like, right after you escaped, and you wanted to do everything you could to keep the family you found? I’m sure you would’ve done *anything* for their approval, and you’re playing on that same fear to try and bring El closer to you, and I’m telling you *now*, bitch, it’s *not* happening on my watch.”

Kali looked momentarily taken aback, before she wiped the expression away to be replaced with a scowl instead. “I don’t *need* to bring Jane closer to me; she’s already my sister.”

“*Exactly*,” Billy emphasized. “Which means you don’t have to create this whole conspiracy that Brenner is after you and only *she* can help you. Brenner is *not* your only connection to her.”

Kali’s eyes lit up with renewed fury. “Are you trying to suggest that we fucking *made this up*, this whole shit with Brenner just so that I would have an excuse to talk to my sister again?!”

Billy sighed and rolled his eyes. “*No*,” he said honestly. “Even *I* don’t think you’d be that cruel – or *stupid*. If you believe Brenner is really still out there, then I believe you. But you don’t need to drag El into this just to be around her again.”

Kali’s hackles lowered slightly, though she still looked angry. “Jane has a right to see him dead as much as I do,” she said, voice tightly controlled. “Are you going to try and stop me from helping her achieve that, too?”

“No,” Billy responded. “But only if that’s what *she* wants to do. If you really want her involved for her own peace of mind, then what the hell, Brenner is a bastard I’d kill if I could too, so have at it. But if you *ever* try and manipulate her into going along with it all, or getting involved in it just so that she can be around you more, then you and me are going to have a real fucking problem.”

He grinned at Kali; it wasn't a happy grin, but one full of teeth, one that let her know that despite her powers, if he had reason to he would be happy to take her down. It actually seemed to reassure the girl, oddly enough, and she pursed her lips, nodding in agreement and even acceptance. It seemed his words had *actually* gotten through to her, so much so that she didn't even look angry anymore at Billy's interference. Upset, maybe – but not like she was ready to attack him at any moment for getting himself involved in all of this.

“You know, the first time I saw you I knew you were a protective older brother to her,” Kali said thoughtfully. “Didn't expect it to be *this* bad, though.”

Billy frowned at her like he was deeply offended, despite the fact that by now he had long since accepted that role in El's life. “Don't spread that disgusting slander again,” he objected strongly.

Kali huffed a small laugh through her nose despite the fact that her expression remained smile-free. “Guess she really doesn't need a street rat like me getting involved now. She's already got you going to bat for her for whatever she needs.”

Billy's frown deepened, now for a different reason entirely. “Don't say that kind of shit,” he protested. “El still wants her big sister around – you should've seen her when she found out about you, and when we were looking for you.”

“Yes, and then like you said, I tried pulling her into the shit show we're a part of,” Kali retorted. “She ran back here for a reason.”

Billy abruptly remembered that Kali didn't actually know about the whole inter-dimensional monster thing, so to her their departure right after all the shit with Ray Carroll was definitely going to appear to be something else entirely. And he would tell her about it, eventually, but right now wasn't the time.

So instead, for the time being he said, “She was excited that you called yesterday. She was worried you would hate her now because of how we left so suddenly in Chicago.” And then he reached out and shoved her in the shoulder, lightly, not intended to harm at all. “Now stop fishing for compliments, Kali. Let's go update El on what's going

on and see what she thinks.”

Kali stared at him for a moment longer, before she gave him a single nod. They turned and went back inside, and Billy sighed a little in relief to himself, because it would’ve been pretty awkward if two of El’s sibling-types hated each other. And while he couldn’t really say that he *liked* Kali at this point, he was glad that at least they seemed to have come to a mutual understanding and respect.

As soon as they were in the living room, leaving Billy and Kali to their talk, the one Steve remembered was called Funshine was pulling a deck of cards from one of his huge pockets, talking about a game of poker. Steve was pretty sure the guy was uncomfortable in his house – that they all were, really, because they looked obviously out of place there. (Not that Steve judged them or anything, it was just that no one was going to think any of *them* lived there with their getups and attitudes. And they were clearly very well aware of that.)

Axel immediately accepted the suggestion, followed by Dottie, and after some prodding, Mick joined in too. Steve knew he was terrible at poker, and declined the offer to join, seeing the glint in Dottie’s eyes that said she had every intention of fleecing him out of every dollar she could. He could respect that viciousness, but he was more of an Uno or Phase 10 kind of guy. The things that wouldn’t be out of place at a kid’s party, much as he hated to think it.

“Will you teach me?” Max asked the crew, blinking her eyes just a *little* too innocently for Steve to trust. He already knew she was a little shit, but with that look he would be guarding his wallet if he were playing against her.

Funshine looked hesitant, probably at the fact that Max was only thirteen and wanted to get in on a more grown-up game, but when El chimed in too that she wanted to learn, Dottie chirped her agreement, and the two girls were joining the circle. Too amused by this, Steve didn’t protest when Max asked if she could borrow a few dollars, pulling out his wallet and giving her and El all the one dollar bills he had.

Several minutes later, Axel in particular looked like he regretted everything that had brought him to this point, and no one had figured out that Max did in fact know exactly what she was doing. Steve wasn't sure about El though, whether she was reading their minds or just had a lot of luck, but the two girls appeared to be trouncing all of them.

"I'm out," Dottie was the first one to say, gathering up the money she had left. "I know when I'm beat."

"One more hand," Axel grumbled, glaring at his steadily depleting pile of bills and coins. Dottie rolled her eyes but didn't say anything, coming over to sit on the couch beside Steve, where he'd settled to watch them all.

They watched quietly as the others continued their game, and Steve couldn't help glancing at Dottie a few times as he did, because there was something about her that he couldn't put his finger on, but she just seemed very...*familiar*. Despite the fact that he was certain he'd never met her. He thought it might be something in the way she moved around his house almost *comfortably*, unlike the rest of her crew.

"The staring," she said suddenly, after he glanced over at her for the fifth time in a minute, "It's weird. Whatever's on your mind, just spit it out, man."

Steve could feel himself color a little, caught, before he gathered himself and said, "You're just...really comfortable here. I'm trying to figure out why."

"You mean on this super comfy couch?" Dottie raised an eyebrow at him, looking amused. "Or in this big-ass mansion?"

"Not a mansion," Steve sighed, because he'd already insisted the same thing to various people not only as he grew up but also more recently to the kids when they came over. It was literally half the size of a small mansion – he knew, because he'd looked up the requirements years ago and his house just didn't have the qualifying square footage.

Dottie waved a hand carelessly. “Yeah, I know,” she dismissed. “I grew up in...this kind of world.”

Steve blinked, stared. “You?” he said incredulously, because while the sentence made sense, it also sort of didn’t, not really. “Then why...I mean, what happened? Why’d you leave?”

Dottie smirked a little. “My parents are dicks,” she said bluntly. “Heard that I was kissing a girl at school and said they’d cut me off if I didn’t straighten out. I said fuck you, packed my bags, followed this girl into a ‘special organization’ she’d heard about. Turned out it was a cult, but I didn’t know that at the time. My parents sent a deprogrammer after me.”

Steve blinked, about to ask what a ‘deprogrammer’ was, when Dottie moved her frizzy hair aside, baring her temples, and after a moment Steve realized that the circular scars there looked like electrical burns. He’d heard about ECT before, thought it was a load of bullshit, but he’d never thought it could look so bad on the person it had been administered to. Everything he’d heard about it, he knew the worst of it was glossed over, but the scars Dottie had looked *painful*.

Dottie let her hair fall back over the scars once more, and smirked a little at him again. “It worked, at least as far as getting me out of the cult went. Didn’t make me hate my parents any less though, and it didn’t make me suddenly long for dick instead. They put me in a mental facility just outside of Chicago to try and get *that* part out of me, but I broke out, and Kali found me. And I found Mick.” She looked over at the dark-skinned girl, who looked up at the sound of her name before smiling briefly at them and turning back to her cards, apparently seeing that she wasn’t being talked to.

Steve blinked at the older girl’s words, and then swallowed. “Uh... that sucks. Why would you – I mean, you don’t know how I would to react that you’re...a lesbian. You don’t even know me; why would you say something so risky like that?”

Dottie gave him a flat look, before she laughed and shook her head. “Harrington, *don’t* try and tell me you’re straight,” she said, and his eyes widened at the bluntness, heart beginning to beat faster, because not even *he* had said it out loud before, but now this practical

stranger was and he didn't know how to take it. "I'm not blind – I can see how you look at Billy."

Steve floundered, opening and closing his mouth, searching for something to say, how to phrase his denial and his ignorance. "I'm – I don't – he's – we're just..."

Dottie smiled mischievously at him in response to his stuttering and finished her thought with, "It's the same way *Billy* looks at *you*."

Steve's mouth snapped shut with a click, and he stared at her with wide eyes, because that...that didn't make sense. Billy was straight. Steve *knew* Billy was straight – he never shut up about hot girls and who had the best legs at school or the biggest tits and whether Farrah Fawcett was *actually* hot or if people just thought so because she was rich and famous. Billy was – *normal*, and definitely *not* queer, and he would definitely be pissed to know that Steve had entertained the fantasy a couple of times before, when he was alone in his room or in the shower.

He didn't know *exactly* what he himself was, because he knew he still liked girls but maybe he liked *Billy* too, and he remembered suddenly when he was younger, maybe eleven or twelve, and he'd thought Tommy's eyes were pretty, but he'd chalked that up to the confusion of puberty and hormones, but maybe that had been the first sign that he wasn't exactly normal. He figured he should've guessed it, when he appreciated muscles and strong jaw lines as much as the gentle lines and soft curves in his fantasies, but it hadn't been until weeks ago after basketball when he'd found his eyes tracing the small curves above Billy's waist that formed slight love handles that he'd realized what was going on.

But he would *never* do anything about it. He liked Billy too much as a friend to risk losing him over something like this. He could be friends with Nancy after she'd broken his heart; it would be nothing to ignore his feelings about Billy until they went away, too.

And he respected Dottie, for coming out to him and even trying to make him feel better about Billy, but she was definitely wrong. Because Billy would never like Steve the same way Steve liked him, and Steve had already accepted that.

He looked over at the group across the room, checking that they hadn't been listening, and was thankful to note that they were fully engrossed in their game. He didn't want to lose Max or El as his friends or as his kids because they found out he fantasized about boys as much as girls – let alone that he had fantasized about their *brother*. Adoptive or otherwise.

Dottie patted his knee, pulling his attention back to her, and her expression was as knowing as it was smug. "You'll see someday."

And Steve knew that she was wrong. He *knew* it.

But still, just for a moment, he allowed himself to hope.

The group of them finally sat down in the late morning, to talk about the reason Kali had brought them all there. It wasn't a long discussion. El insisted on looking for "Papa", just to be sure he was gone, despite both Billy and Max and even Kali telling her that she didn't *need* to be a part of this. She trusted Kali's word, and she didn't want to go back to the lab or put any of her friends or found family in danger, either, so even though she was scared at the possibility of seeing him again, she was determined to look.

And as it so happened, El found Brenner. Not in Hawkins – he was in St. Louis, apparently talking with someone else who used to work at the lab. He looked very much alive, and seemed to be planning to get his experiments back, just as Kali had said.

When Kali had told them later that evening that they would be heading to St. Louis to take care of Brenner – or, in her words, "clean up the mess" – El had looked at Billy before looking back at Kali.

"Family is here," she said, and for a moment Kali looked gutted, before El went on, "You are family, too."

Billy stood between Max and Steve in a line on one side of the room, and they watched as El went and hugged Kali tightly. "Call if you need help," she said seriously. "Hopper will help me help you."

Kali's face spasmed briefly, before she returned El's hug just as

tightly. “I’ll call to let you know when we get there,” she promised.

“And come visit when you’re done?” El suggested hopefully, pulling back to look at the older girl.

Kali nodded, eyes shiny. “Yes. Yes, we’ll come visit you again. We’re sisters – we’re not going to be separated for long, do you understand?”

El nodded, and hugged her sister again.

Two weeks later, El was sitting in the cabin she shared with Hopper, coloring in one of the books Billy had gotten her last time he’d come by. The radio played quietly in the corner, providing background noise so that she didn’t feel so alone. Hopper would be home soon, and then she would tell him the new words she had learned that day while they had dinner.

She liked Hop. He was a good dad, even if he didn’t think so. She had learned more about black holes since he had told her about them, and she thought he was wrong about how he saw himself. He was good in a way she knew a lot of people weren’t. Bad things just happened to him a lot, but it wasn’t his fault.

She swung her feet a little in the chair, her heels thudding against the wooden legs. She picked up a blue crayon called “cornflower” to color in the flower, and focused on keeping her scribbles within the lines.

She was about halfway finished with one petal when her head snapped up, freezing completely for a long moment. Her eyes unfocused a little, going distant as she listened to be certain of what she’d heard and sensed. Then she was tossing the crayon to the side, shoving the chair back and running to the front door.

Throwing the door open, she beamed with joy as she ran down the porch steps just as Kali opened the door to the familiar van. She ran across the cold ground, disregarding the way the damp leaves soaked her socked feet.

A moment later, the two sisters were hugging once again.

Author's Note:

So that no one is confused, Kali and her crew are not there to stay forever. They're just visiting. But I wanted there to be the implication that Kali is not done being in El's life, because they're sisters no matter what, so although I don't have plans to show Kali or any of her crew again in the future, you can assume that they still visit.

Also, I only used Brenner as a plot point. He's gone now - Kali dealt with him. I had considered drawing out this plotline, but when it comes down to it Brenner *is* just a man, and he lost a lot of clout when he supposedly died in the first season, so it would be easier for Kali and her crew to deal with him after knowing where to find him.

Anyway. We also see Steve's thoughts on his crush on Billy! Finally! The next fic they *should* be getting together, but we'll see what happens lol. I'm ready for them to be a Thing now!

So, I hoped you liked this installment - thank you for reading!